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SAFER CHEMICAL PLANTS

Editorial | Act now, not later

The scene: A Washington hearing room.

The time: Several years from now.

A distinguished former governor, head of a new presidential commission, leans into the microphone and questions the grim, fidgety former secretary of homeland security:

"Why weren't you prepared for a deadly chemical cloud? Didn't you remember what happened in Bhopal in 1984? More people died in that accident than in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks."

"Yes, sir, we knew the risks. In fact, the Environmental Protection Agency had identified 15,000 U.S. chemical plants where a release could endanger tens of millions of people. EPA had even put 123 plants in a worst-case category, where more than a million people could die."

"So these plants had beefed up security, right? Taken every precaution?"

"No, sir. Security was very spotty."

"What makes you say that?"

"For three years after Sept. 11, newspaper and TV reporters were able to waltz onto chemical-plant property, take photos, and even sit on tanks of hazardous chemicals without so much as a question, as long as they gave a friendly wave."

"So why didn't homeland security do something?"

"We tried, sir. Former Secretary Tom Ridge warned about the dangers in 2002, as did EPA administrator Christie Whitman, but Congress didn't act. Members didn't want to bog down private industry with a lot of regulations."

"But commercial airports and nuclear power plants had strict security rules and frequent inspections. Why didn't Congress require the same of chemical plants?"

"Industry assured us that voluntary measures would work."

"And now a million people are dead."

"Yes, sir. Now a million people are dead."

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While Americans worry about suitcase bombs and biological agents, a more accessible terrorist weapon lies, literally, in many of their backyards. With an explosion, a gunshot, a forced leak, the chemical plant down the street that quietly churns out useful fertilizers, plastics or pharmaceuticals could turn deadly. Congress has the power to make those plants safer.

Since October 2001, though, busy industry lobbyists defeated repeated efforts by Sen. Jon Corzine (D., N.J.) to upgrade chemical-plant security. His bills required plants to identify vulnerabilities, construct better defenses, and, where practicable, use inherently safer technologies or substitute products to reduce hazardous chemicals onsite.

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the dangers, the bill stalled. A group of senators, including Arlen Specter (R., Pa.), even changed their minds after approving the bill in committee.

Credit lobbyists with White House access and the influence of money. According to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics, the chemical manufacturing industry contributed \$14.3 million to campaigns - 78 percent to Republicans, who control Congress - in the two election cycles since 2001.

The Senate is exploring federal oversight of chemical-plant security again, this time led by Susan Collins (R., Maine) and Joseph Lieberman (D., Conn.). A small-scale chemical-attack simulation last month in Connecticut caught their attention. They realized that if one chemical car bomb could kill thousands and ruin a regional economy, a larger explosion would be devastating.

Also pushing for mandatory security standards is former Bush homeland security adviser Richard Falkenrath, who considers a chemical-plant attack easier to accomplish and more likely than nuclear or biological terrorism. He blames himself for past administration foot-dragging.

"It is a fallacy to think that profit-maximizing corporations engaged in a trade as inherently dangerous as the manufacture and shipment of... chemicals will ever voluntarily provide a level of security that is appropriate," he told Congress last month.

The case is clear. Chemical plants pose a unique terrorist risk that potentially endanger millions of Americans. Congress should make them safer - before the act, not afterward.

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